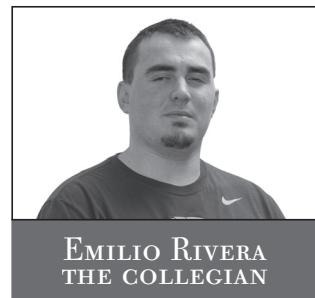


HEAD 2 HEAD

Cowboys could make deep tourney run

EMILIO RIVERA
THE COLLEGIAN

After a controversy-filled and disappointing regular season, Oklahoma State (21-12, 8-10 Big 12) seems to be getting hot at the right time to make a deep run into the NCAA tournament.

The Cowboys, after being widely projected to share the Big 12 title with Kansas before the season started, began conference play going a pathetic 4-9, a mark that failed in comparison to the hype they had received. Then midway through conference play, the Cowboys were in the news for something even more disturbing: star sophomore guard Marcus Smart pushed a fan during a physical altercation that garnered him a three-game suspension.

The good news for Travis Ford's Cowboys team is that they are in the midst of their best performance of the season. The Cowboys are 5-2 since Smart has returned from suspension. Their two losses came at then No. 16 Iowa State in overtime and last night against No. 10 Kansas.

Most of the recent success can be drawn, oddly enough, from the three-game span of Smart's suspension. Even while his team lost by a small-margin of six points per game, including a six point overtime loss to Baylor, Ford's team learned to play without their star guard. Now with Smart back, Ford's team is a much better rounded program that is capable of playing without Smart in key situations.

Defense had been a crutch in this down season for the Cowboys. Ford's team is first in the Big 12 in steals, averaging 7.5 per game, while being ranked 13th in the nation turnover margin of 3.5 per game. With 75 steals on the season, Smart is ranked fifth in the nation in steals per game, propelling his team on the defensive end and making life hard for opposing ball-handlers.

Another stat that shows the Cowboys' talent is their scoring margin of 11.6 points per game despite their 12 losses. They are ranked 17th in the nation in scoring margin, showing that they can run away with a game against any team, and have posted 16 victories by double-digits.

Ford and the Cowboys might also have the most underrated senior in the Big 12, guard Markel Brown. Brown averages 17.3 points per game, only .6 less than Smart. Brown has averaged in double-digits in three straight seasons. Playing 35.1 minutes per game, Brown has become a constant for the Cowboys and could propel them in the tournament even when Smart is not out on the floor.

To add even more depth to this group, sophomore guard Phil Forte III ranks sixth in the nation in 3-point percentage, draining 45.2 percent of his shots from behind the arc. Forte can be the spark to start any run for the Cowboys.

It is Brown and Forte, when added with the superstar qualities of Smart, that puts the Cowboys ahead of all of the other Big 12 programs and could push them further in the tournament.

If the Cowboys can figure out how to use what they have learned throughout their turbulent season, they could end up being a bracket buster. Failing to live up to the hype that they were given to start the season, the Cowboys could use their fire to make a deep run in the tournament behind Smart and Brown.

Don't count the Cowboys out just because of their slow start. Their recent surge has them in perfect position to manifest their lofty preseason rankings.

Emilio Rivera is a freshman in pre-journalism and mass communications. Please send all comments to sports@kstatecollegian.com.



EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN

Oklahoma State guard Marcus Smart pushes past Kansas freshman guard Wayne Selden on Thursday at the Sprint Center during the first round of the Phillips 66 Big 12 Championship tournament. After defeating Oklahoma State KU will play Iowa State in the third round.

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NCAA Tournament could feature possible Cats-Shockers in-state bout

By JOHN ZETMEIR
THE COLLEGIAN

Wichita State has shocked

the country this season, entering

the NCAA tournament with a

perfect record. With selection

Sunday only a few days away,

the state of Kansas is likely to put

three teams in the NCAA tourna-

ment. The possibility of an in-

state square off between the three

Kansas schools, fans in the state

of Kansas should be more exci-

ted than ever for March Madness.

This season, the Wildcats of

K-State and Jayhawks of Kansas

split their regular season series.

Would a game three between

the two schools be entertaining?

Sure, but this is isn't an uncom-

mon matchup. Something that

Kansas fans don't get to see

ever year would be a matchup

between the Shockers and Jay-

hawks or the Shockers and Wild-

cats. The Shockers will likely get

a No. 1 seed for the NCAA tourna-

ment, if they do and it's in the

midwest, we could be in line for

a Kansas matchup. The Wildcats

have been projected to get any-

where from an eight to a 10 seed

in the tournament. If these two fall in the same region, a third round matchup would look very possible. Of course, both of the teams would have to win at least one game before playing each other.

Hypothetically, if the Wildcats do nab the No. 8 seed in the midwest with the Shockers getting their top seed in the same region, how can fans vote against the potential matchup? Not only would this likely be an exciting game for the fans, but good for the state of Kansas. How would the Shockers handle a player like freshman guard Marcus Foster from K-State who has found success scoring against the top competition in the Big 12? Could the Wildcats handle the craftiness of Shockers sophomore point guard Fred VanVleet? These questions can only be answered if the two can find a way to square off.

The matchup that nearly every basketball fan in the Sunflower state wants is the Jayhawks and Shockers. Kansas has been a blue-blood basketball program in the country for much of its existence, but for once, they have not been the highest ranked

Freshman forward Wesley Iwundu takes aim over an Iowa State defender on Thursday at the Sprint Center. The Wildcats fell 91-85 in the second round of the Phillips 66 Big 12 Championship tournament.



By the Numbers

BY SPENCER LOW
THE COLLEGIAN

1

K-State had the top scoring defense and 3-point defense in the Big 12 during the regular season. The Wildcats may not put up huge numbers on offense, but their defense has been stingy all year, something that head coach Bruce Weber can hang his hat on. As the famous line goes, offense wins games but defense wins championships. The Wildcats are hoping this will prove true.

5

Number of wins away from Bramlage Coliseum this season for K-State. The Wildcats dominated at home this year, but struggled mightily on the road, especially once league play started, winning just two away games against Big 12 opponents. The Wildcats will need to find a way to get wins away from home in the NCAA Tournament or else they will be watching most of the action from home.

21

Freshman Marcus Foster's points scored against



EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN
Senior Will Spradling brings the ball up the court against Iowa State on Thursday at the Sprint Center.



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Big 12 champs more than worthy of No. 1 seed in postseason play

BY DAVID EMBERS
THE COLLEGIAN

Iowa State in the Big 12 Tournament. Despite an opening round loss, Foster did what he does best in putting the ball through the hoop against the Cyclones on Thursday, and he will need to remain hot in the NCAA Tournament. Some freshman shy away from the spotlight in big games, but Foster shines. Look for him to continue to score buckets in bunches in the tournament.

65.6

K-State's free throw percentage in the regular season. Watching K-State struggle at the line is nothing new for Wildcat fans, but the team will need to tighten it up at the charity stripe in March Madness. Free throws can make a huge impact in games, especially on the biggest stages. K-State finished last in the Big 12 free throw percentage in the regular season and will need to focus on this aspect of their game when the tournament starts.

1021

Career points by senior guard Will Spradling. K-State is going to need senior leadership in the tournament, and Spradling has been the glue that holds the team together this season. He plays at either guard spot and can defend multiple positions. Spradling will have to step up if this team wants to make any type of run this March.

I don't necessarily agree with it, but the near unanimous prediction from analysts across the country is that Arizona, Wichita State and Florida are locks for No. 1 seeds in the upcoming NCAA tournament. That leaves just one top seed left. Based on their entire body of work, and way the selection committee has selected in the past, I believe Kansas will be awarded the final No. 1 spot.

Fans like to argue seeding leading up to Selection Sunday, but the truth of the matter is that being a No. 2 seed or being a No. 1 seed doesn't matter that much. In fact, Bill Self has been quoted as saying he would rather play closer to Lawrence and be a No. 2 seed, than be awarded a top seed and be sent to the East or West coast. With the way KU travels, I can totally understand Self preferring to stay close to home; any home court advantage you can gain while in the tournament is huge.

In the end, it probably doesn't matter that much. There is a sense of pride when you are awarded a top seed, but beyond that, there isn't much benefit. Even still, the selection committee should reward the Jayhawks for challenging themselves in non-conference play. Send a statement to the rest of the country that playing cupcakes (cough-cough Wichita State) during the non-conference is not acceptable. In my mind, the Jayhawks have done enough to garner the top spot. There were certainly some bumps along the way, and their record isn't amazing, but when you step back and look at their entire body of work, KU has done enough to earn the final No. 1 seed.

David Embers is a junior in biology. Please send all comments to sports@statecollegian.com.

EMILY DESHAZER | THE COLLEGIAN
Kansas freshman guard Andrew Wiggins dribbles around Oklahoma State sophomore Marcus Smart during the second round of the Big 12 Championship tournament Thursday.



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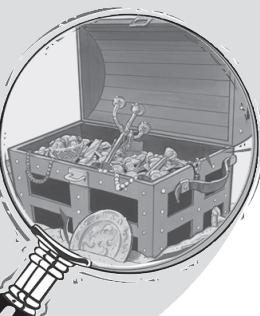
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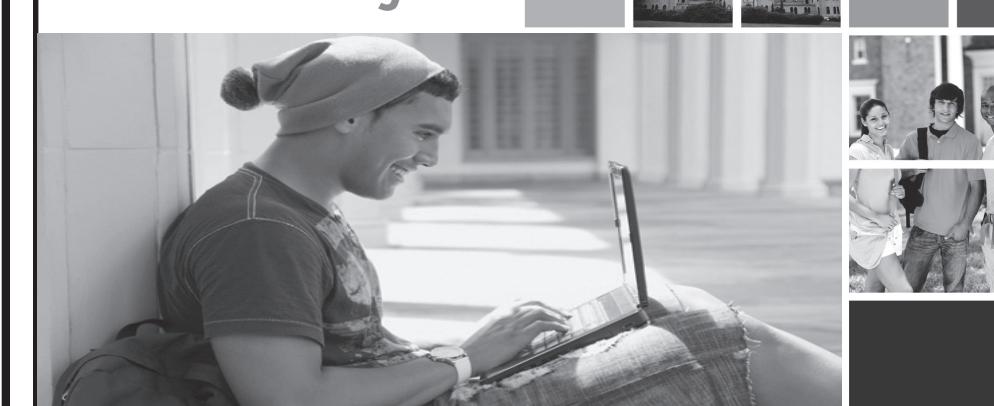
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